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A Dynasty at the Docks: the Reyniers Family and the Association des Intérêts Maritimes de Gand, 1900–2000

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At the turn of the twentieth century, the Reyniers family emerged as one of the key maritime families shaping the port of Ghent. Across three generations, family members worked as shipping agents, company managers and representatives of maritime employers, and played an active role in the economic and institutional life of the harbour. Their activities ranged from shipping agencies and liner services to organisations that defended the interests of the port community. Through these roles, the family became deeply embedded in the structures that governed Ghent's maritime economy.

One of the principal arenas in which this influence was exercised was the Association des Intérêts Maritimes de Gand, founded in 1904. This private interest group brought together brokers, shipping agents, stevedores and other port entrepreneurs to represent their shared interests and strengthen their collective voice in negotiations with public authorities. Over the twentieth century, members of the Reyniers family held several leadership positions within the Association, helping to shape debates on port infrastructure, labour relations and maritime policy. Their sustained involvement shows how family businesses could play a significant role in the governance and development of a medium-sized European port. In 2024, cargo traffic at the Port of Ghent exceeded 29 million tonnes, with 67 million tonnes across North Sea Port (Ghent-Terneuzen-Vlissingen), placing it ninth in the European port rankings by cargo transport.[2]

The history of the Reyniers family is particularly well documented in the archives of the Association des Intérêts Maritimes de Gand, the forerunner of today's Voka/VeGHO (Flemish network of enterprises/Association for Ghent Port-Related Companies) and Ghent Port Community. Preserved at Liberas, the Ghent-based centre for the history of the liberal ideal of freedom in Belgium, these records provide a detailed account of the organisation's activities.[3] Annual reports, membership lists and internal documents reveal not only the evolution of port policy and economic networks, but also the individuals who shaped them. From 1927 onwards, the reports include extensive

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[2] North Sea Port,' rijk verleden, rijkere toekomst,' *North Sea Port*, <https://www.northseaport.com/nl/over-ons/wat-is-north-sea-port> accessed 4 April 2026.

[3] Liberas, Archief Vereniging van Gentse Havengebonden Ondernemingen (VeGHO) / Gentse Havengemeenschap (archief nr. 110), <https://n2t.net/ark:/55068/LAG_1255654> accessed 26 August 2026.

membership lists that make it possible to trace the participation of companies and families within the port community over time.[4]

This article uses the Reyniers family to explore the development of the port of Ghent and its maritime interest organisations between 1900 and 2000. Rather than offering a complete history of the port, it uses one family and one association archive to show how private-sector port governance can be reconstructed from business records. By reconstructing the activities of three generations, from Guillaume Reyniers to his descendants, it highlights how family firms contributed to the institutional life of the harbour and to the culture of consultation that characterised Ghent's port community. It also demonstrates the value of port association archives as sources for maritime and family history, revealing the social networks that underpinned a modern European port. In large countries, national maritime-sector associations often take the lead in lobbying policymakers. In smaller countries such as Belgium and the Netherlands, however, this role is often taken by umbrella organisations at the level of individual seaports, such as Deltalinqs in Rotterdam, Alfaport Voka in Antwerp, and Voka/VeGHO in Ghent.[5]

The Port of Ghent: Historical Context

In 2027 Ghent's seaport will be 200 years old. By the end of the nineteenth century the Handelsdok, one of the oldest docks in the port of Ghent, was already busy. The city had sought a direct connection to the sea since the Middle Ages. In the thirteenth century this connection ran via the river Lieve to the Zwin and the city of Damme. In the sixteenth century the Sassevaart was built towards the Westerschelde. Finally, in 1827, the Ghent-Terneuzen Canal gave the city a true sea canal and became its main economic lifeline.[6]

The port of Ghent underwent a process of modernisation in the early twentieth century. Although Antwerp remained dominant nationally, Ghent steadily grew into a major regional player thanks to investment in infrastructure and increasing industrial activity in the canal area. Ghent was an important port before the First World War, with trade routes to Britain and the US serving the cotton industry, among others. *The Cotton Trade*

[4] Henri Florin and Paul Verspeelt, *Van Association Des Intérêts Maritimes De Gand Tot Vereniging Van Gentse Havengebonden Ondernemingen (1904–2004): Een Eeuw Vertegenwoordiging Van De Privé-Sector In De Haven Van Gent* (Gent: VeGHO, 2004), pp.23–5.

[5] Athanasios Pallis and Theo Notteboom, 'Representing Port Interests' in Theo Notteboom, Athanasios Pallis and Jean-Paul Rodrigue (eds), *Port Economics, Management and Policy* (New York: Routledge, 2022), p.541, <https://porteconomicsmanagement.org/pemp/contents/part11/representing-port-interests/> accessed 16 March 2026.

[6] Jeroen Brugge, 'Die niet zuipt of koopt, wordt niet gerekend om te werken. Het sociaal overleg met betrekking tot de Gentse haven tijdens het interbellum (1919–1939)' (Master thesis: University of Ghent, 2009), pp.1-2.

Journal of Savannah, the journal of the cotton exchange in Savannah, USA, declared in 1906: 'Ghent, as everybody knows, occupies in fact a geographical position which one may call without hesitation a truly privileged one from the standpoint of a distribution place. It ranks as a first class port...'.[7] A handful of cotton factories operated in the city at the beginning of the nineteenth century; by the later nineteenth century mechanised spinning and the new canal to Terneuzen had helped this number rise to around 80. The cotton industry became one of the city's most important economic sectors, attracting labour and supporting major firms such as Jules de Hemptinne (founded 1853) and Société Linière La Lys (founded 1838).[8]

The original canal of 1827 soon proved insufficient for the larger steamships that gradually replaced sailing ships in the mid-nineteenth century. Work to deepen and enlarge the canal began around 1870. In 1910 a new sea lock opened, enabling the port to expand. A significant addition was the construction of the Grootdok, with its three smaller side docks. The harbour grew rapidly: by 1930 Ghent had become the fourth-largest port in Europe, after Hamburg, Rotterdam and Antwerp. In that year it recorded international trade of approximately 10 million tonnes, including both imports and exports.[9]

As the port grew, so did opportunities for work and business. Around 1900, employer groups emerged in sub-sectors such as shipowning, stevedoring, shipping agencies and line agencies. Organisations were formed to combine resources and strengthen members' leverage in negotiations. Some disappeared as the industry changed, while others adapted and survived. Crucial among them was the Association des Intérêts Maritimes de Gand, which still has an institutional legacy today.

The Association des Intérêts Maritimes de Gand: the Port of Ghent and its Families

On 8 April 1904 the Association des Intérêts Maritimes de Gand (hereafter the Association) was founded as an independent interest group for the port of Ghent. It emerged from the maritime section of the Cercle Commercial et Industriel, a liberal and industrial circle founded in 1858. Members wanted an independent organisation with greater capacity to communicate quickly and directly with government.[10] Membership

[7] Florin and Verspeel, *Van Association Des Intérêts Maritimes,* p.34.
[8] René De Herdt, 'Gent op weg naar de eerste industriële revolutie', (1987) 5, 19, *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis van Techniek en Industriële Cultuur*, pp.26–33.
[9] Jan Strubbe, 'De ontwikkeling van de Belgische zeehavens: Een groei naar de zee' (1990) 13, 1, *Gewina/Tijdschrift voor de Geschiedenis van Geneeskunde, Natuurwetenschappen, Wiskunde en Techniek*, p.117.
[10] Liberas, Archief Vereniging van Gentse Havengebonden Ondernemingen (VeGHO) / Gentse Havengemeenschap (archief nr. 110), 1.1 yearbooks, 1905.; Florin and Verspeelt. *Van Association Des Intérêts Maritimes*, p.17.

expanded quickly. By 1927, the Association had surpassed 100 member companies, and after the Second World War this figure rose to more than 400. Similar initiatives appeared elsewhere. Around 1900, employer groups emerged across a range of sectors.11 In 1901, the Fédération Maritime d'Anvers (Antwerp Maritime Federation) was founded to improve labour relations between workers and owners. In the same year the Union Générale pour la Protection du Travail au Port d'Anvers was established; it claimed to unite employers and employees in one organisation, but mainly supported owners' interests in an effort to counter the rise of trade unions.12 These first employer organisations in Ghent and Antwerp were not primarily concerned with workers' pay or employment conditions, but with protecting the commercial interests of their members.[13]

The Ghent Association was supported by influential figures from the port elite. Its initiator was Maurice de Smet de Naeyer (1862–1941), son of a prominent textile manufacturer and nephew of the later Belgian minister Paul de Smet de Naeyer (1843–1913). Maurice became the Association's first president. The executive committee consisted of eleven representatives of local port companies and was responsible for appointing the day-to-day management, known as the Bureau. The Association's office was located at Rue Longue du Marais 15, now Universiteitsstraat. Membership required a company presence in the port of Ghent. At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, shipbrokers attracted some of the most important trade, including liner services to Great Britain, Scandinavia and the USA. They were also responsible for the coal, iron and timber trades for which Ghent was well known.14

Several families left their mark on the Association throughout the twentieth century, most notably the de Smet de Naeyer, Vyane and Reyniers families. In the organisation's early years, members of these families occupied nearly all key positions, including president, vice-president and treasurer. As a result, much of the Association's daily management, as well as a significant share of its decision-making power, rested in the hands of a small group of firms. A similar pattern could be observed in the Fédération Maritime d'Anvers, where a limited circle of individuals divided the most influential

[11] Florin and Verspeelt. *Van Association Des Intérêts Maritimes,* pp.17–18.

[12] Stephan Vanfraechem, 'Survival of the Fittest? Macht en concurrentiekracht in de Antwerpse Haven 1960-1964' (2001) *Neha-Jaarboek voor economische, bedrijfs-en techniekgeschiedenis*, p.196.

[13] Stephan Vanfraechem, *Een sfeer om haring te braden. Arbeidsverhoudingen in de haven van Antwerpen, 1880-1972* (Gent: Academia Press, 2005), pp.40–3.

[14] Florin and Verspeelt, *Van Association Des Intérêts Maritimes,* pp.19–20.

posts among themselves.[15] Within the Association, the Reyniers family proved particularly prominent: it supplied two chairmen and remained represented on the board of directors well into the twenty-first century, demonstrating its enduring commitment to the interests of the port of Ghent.

A Family Business in Motion: Reyniers Frères

The family's activities were not limited to interest representation on the Association's board; they also extended to the operational side of the harbour. The maritime roots of the Reyniers family reached back to 1835, when Guillaume Reyniers founded the shipping agency Louis de Brabant with Désiré Willems. A shipping agent ensured that ships could enter the port without difficulty and that cargo could be loaded or delivered smoothly. The firm maintained liner services to Rotterdam and London. His son, Guillaume Polydore Reyniers (1844–1923), continued the business with his wife Catherine Willems (1840–93). In 1904 Louis de Brabant became a co-founder of the Association.[16] After the firm was dissolved in 1919, Guillaume Polydore's sons, Guillaume Jean Marie (1872–1952) and Charles Reyniers (1875–1964), continued the business under the name Reyniers Frères.[17] Under the flag of Ghent Steamship Lines, the family company organised regular liner services between Ghent and Rotterdam-Amsterdam. In 1954 five lines are listed between Ghent and destinations including the Gulf of Mexico, the UK and Scandinavia.[18] Through Reyniers Frères, the family provided a representative on the Association's management committee from 1919 onwards and held several positions in the Association's Bureau. Reyniers Frères, like its predecessor Louis de Brabant, was a shipping agency, located at Place du Dock 23 (later Stapelplein) in Ghent.[19]

Business succession remained within the family. Like Guillaume and his brother Charles before them, André and Marcel Reyniers succeeded their father in the firm. From the mid-twentieth century, the Reyniers brothers merged their activities with the stevedoring company Sogama (Société Gantoise de Manutention), with which they established themselves at Stapelplein 17 in Ghent. The company stored bulk goods before

[15] Liberas, Archief Vereniging van Gentse Havengebonden Ondernemingen (VeGHO) / Gentse Havengemeenschap (archief nr. 110), 1.1 yearbooks, 1905.; Vanfraechem. *Een sfeer om haring te braden* (Gent: Academia Press, 2005), p.42.
[16] Liberas, Archief Het Laatste Nieuws kantoor Gent (archief nr. 1103), 373, Kris Naudts, 'Schouders van 'n schone vrouw' (*Het nieuwsblad*, 10 November 1987); Rijksarchief Gent (from now abbreviated as RAG), Births Ghent, 1844, birth certificate Guillaume Polydore Reyniers, <agatha.arch.be> accessed 16 June 2025.
[17] Liberas, Archief Het Laatste Nieuws kantoor Gent (archief nr. 1103), 373, Kris Naudts, Schouders van 'n schone vrouw,' (*Het nieuwsblad*, 10 November 1987).
[18] Liberas, Archief Vereniging van Gentse Havengebonden Ondernemingen (VeGHO) / Gentse Havengemeenschap (archief nr. 110), 1.1.19 yearbooks, 1954.
[19] Liberas, Archief Vereniging van Gentse Havengebonden Ondernemingen (VeGHO) / Gentse Havengemeenschap (archief nr. 110), 1.1.20 yearbooks, 1955.

they were shipped onwards. Reyniers Frères & Sogama became a leading firm in the port of Ghent and was also incorporated into the Association.[20]

Guillaume Jean Marie Reyniers: a Key Figure in Ghent's Maritime Interests

The young Association found an important advocate in Guillaume J. M. Reyniers. He was listed as treasurer in the first yearbook (1904/5) and later became chairman, succeeding Maurice de Smet de Naeyer and helping to build the organisation into an influential voice for Ghent's maritime entrepreneurs.[21] Guillaume was a skilled negotiator, but did not shy away from clear views. In 1910 he is mentioned as co-representative, with Edgard Spaey, for the shipping agency Ghent Lloyd N.V. This agency was founded in 1907 by the Nolson brothers, with support from various Ghent elites, and operated several liner services. The company was dissolved in 1920, after which Guillaume focused on his own firm, Reyniers Frères.[22] He married Victorine Deroose and lived with his wife and sons at the Stapelplein, where the company was located.[23]

From 1919, Guillaume Reyniers served as vice-president of the Association, and in 1921 he officially assumed the presidency. Under his leadership, the Association took up important dossiers, including pilotage reform. Pilots helped vessels navigate local waters. Guillaume advocated the expansion of the pilotage corps, fixed tariffs for the service, and the establishment of pilots in Ghent and Terneuzen. He also pushed for fair railway fares for dockworkers, in line with those in Antwerp, and succeeded in 1919. He further advocated for a connection between the Handelsdok, Houtdok and Grootdok.[24]

Within the Consultation Committee of the Port, established in 1920, Guillaume was an influential voice for the brokers, who arranged transport contracts between shipowners and cargo providers. He challenged unjust tariffs and promoted structured consultation between government, employers and employees. In addition to his role in the Association, he headed the Centrale des Employeurs au Port de Gand (CEPG), or Port of Ghent Employers' Centre, until 1946. There he was responsible for social consultation with dockworkers. The organisation had been founded with assistance from the

[20] Liberas, Archief Het Laatste Nieuws kantoor Gent (archief nr. 1103), 373, Kris Naudts, 'Schouders van 'n schone vrouw' (*Het nieuwsblad,* 10 November 1987).

[21] Liberas, Archief Vereniging van Gentse Havengebonden Ondernemingen (VeGHO) / Gentse Havengemeenschap (archief nr. 110), 1.1.10 yearbooks, 1921.

[22] Guido De Latte, ' Gentse maritieme reders, scheepsmakelaars en scheepsfinaciers in de negentiende eeuw,' (2015) 44, 6, *Ghendtsche Tydinghen*, pp.351–2.

[23] RAG, Births Ghent, 1907, birth certificate André Marie Prosper Jean Reyniers, <agatha.arch.be > accessed 23 June 2025.

[24] Florin and Verspeelt. *Van Association Des Intérêts Maritimes,* p.45.

Association in the inter-war period to support discussions around employees' pay.[25] Similar developments occurred in Antwerp, where the Central Organisation of Employers at the Port of Antwerp (CEPA) was established on 22 March 1929.[26] At a time of social tension and strikes, Guillaume Reyniers helped shape the consultation model in the port of Ghent. Jeroen Brugge's research on Ghent dockworkers, based on reports from the port's advisory committee, the Labour Committee and the municipal council, presents Guillaume as a unifying figure. He sought mutual respect between labour and capital during the negotiations of 1929 and the social agreement of 1936, which followed a wave of national strikes.[27] The strike had been launched by dockworkers who sought to highlight the limited influence of joint consultation and to demand higher wages. It quickly spread to other sectors of labour.[28] Guillaume sought to guide the harbour community towards more open debate and better communication among the various actors involved in the port. During the negotiations of the 1930s, he called for a more structured consultation system. In a letter written on behalf of the Association and the shipbrokers, he argued for regular meetings between all stakeholders, proposing that representatives of the different parties meet at fixed intervals to address port-related issues more efficiently.[29] Guillaume also helped shape the Association itself. In June 1938, under his leadership, the Association became a fully-fledged non-profit organisation while retaining its social objective. Its board of directors was to be composed of 24 members elected by the general assembly from among companies whose purpose was shipping or brokerage.

Between the Lines: Guillaume Reyniers and the Association During the Two World Wars

Only limited information is available on Guillaume Reyniers's activities during the two world wars, because organisations such as the Association des Intérêts Maritimes de Gand were suspended during both occupations. Annual reports for 1914–18 and 1939–45 are therefore missing.[30] The annual report published in 1919 states that the German occupation of Ghent in 1914 brought both the port and the Association's activities to a complete standstill. This continued until the armistice on 11 November 1918. The port was used only to a limited extent during the First World War, mainly for the transport of

[25] Liberas, Archief Vereniging van Gentse Havengebonden Ondernemingen (VeGHO) / Gentse Havengemeenschap (archief nr. 110), 1.1.18 yearbooks, 1948.
[26] *Cepa,*'Historiek,' *Cepa* <https://www.cepa.be/werkgevers/over-cepa/historiek/> accessed 26 February 2026.
[27] Brugge, 'Die niet zuipt of koopt', pp.48–109.
[28] Stephan Vanfraechem and Bob Baete, *100 jaar havenarbeidersbond Antwerpen. Van dokwerker tot havenarbeider* (Gent: AMSAB-ISG, 2004), pp.63-6.
[29] Brugge, 'Die niet zuipt of koopt', p.75.
[30] Florin and Verspeelt, *Van Association Des Intérêts Maritimes,* p.15.

timber from the Netherlands and the Rhine delta for German construction works.[31] A similar interruption occurred during the Second World War. The Association's activities again fell silent, and no annual reports were produced during the occupation years. It was only in 1945 that the organisation resumed its reporting, describing the years between 1939 and 1945 retrospectively.[32]

Despite the suspension of the Association's activities, the family firm Reyniers Frères continued to operate during the Second World War. After the Belgian surrender in May 1940, several industrial and commercial leaders, including firms such as the timber trader Van Hoorebeke, resumed limited economic activity. They did so in a difficult context. Although such activity could indirectly benefit the occupying forces, it was also seen by many contemporaries as necessary to maintain production and prevent shortages. The British naval blockade restricted maritime movement and placed pressure on food supplies. The Galopin Committee, acting in connection with the Belgian government in exile in London, encouraged continued industrial and port activity in Belgium in order to sustain essential imports and preserve the economy under occupation. This policy led many firms in Belgian ports to adopt a pragmatic strategy of limited economic accommodation. It was later criticised by some as economic collaboration, while others defended it as a means of preserving infrastructure and limiting harsher measures such as labour deportations.[33]

In a 1987 interview, André Reyniers (1907–97), Guillaume's son, described how he built new shipping links with Scandinavia during the Second World War. A Stockholm-based firm had contacted him through one of the Association's promotional booklets. According to Reyniers, the Swedish company appreciated that Reyniers Frères, like its own firm, was run by two brothers. During the war, the Swedish company stored goods on the quays of Ghent harbour. When German occupation forces began loading girders and steel beams intended for bridge repair, Reyniers intervened. He protested and requested official receipts, pointing out that the goods belonged to a neutral country. His intervention eventually preserved goods worth two million Belgian francs (around €740,000 today, following the consumer price index), which could be sent back to

[31] Liberas, Archief Vereniging van Gentse Havengebonden Ondernemingen (VeGHO) / Gentse Havengemeenschap (archief nr. 110), 1.1.8 yearbooks, 1919; Michel Steels, 'Te Gent tijdens de eerste wereldoorlog' (1978) *Ghendtsche Tydinghen* 7, 6, p.265.

[32] Florin and Verspeelt, *Van Association Des Intérêts Maritimes,* p.15; Mark Van den Wijngaert, *Nood breekt wet: economische collaboratie of accommodatie: het beleid van Alexandre Galopin gouverneur van de Société générale tijdens de Duitse bezetting (1940-1944)* (Tielt: Lannoo, 1990), p.26.

[33] Van den Wijngaert, *Nood breekt wet,* pp.25–8.

Sweden. According to Reyniers, the Swedish firm remained grateful for this wartime intervention.[34]

André Reyniers: Central Figure in the Modern Port of Ghent

In 1945 Guillaume Reyniers passed the presidency of the Association to his vice-president, Pierre Vyane.[35] Family representation in the Association was then continued by his son, André Reyniers.[36] In the decades that followed, André became a pivotal figure within Ghent's port organisations. His long career, which formally ended only in 1989, was characterised by diplomacy, openness towards Europe and a progressive view of port development.

André Reyniers took his first steps into port life in the 1930s in his family's company, Reyniers Frères. After a few months, he moved to London to work as an apprentice with the shipbroker John Miller. After returning to Belgium, he became a member of the Comité Paritaire Régional du Port de Gand (Regional Joint Committee of the Port of Ghent) in the working group of the Ghent Maritime & Inland Waterway Employers' Centre from 1948 to 1954.[37] As second vice-president of the Association from the mid-1950s, and subsequently as first vice-president, he remained an influential voice in the Association for decades. In 1963 the Association changed its name to Vereniging Gentse Zeevartbelangen (Ghent Maritime Interests Association).[38]

André was known as an erudite man who spoke several languages and facilitated cooperation with international contacts. During the 1955 Ghent Floraliën, a four-yearly exhibition of flowers and plants, he invited prominent representatives of the European iron and steel industry to attend the flower show and participate in the official banquet. This helped develop new trade contacts and support the port's international profile.[39] His influence extended beyond the Association. Like his father, he was chairman of the CEPG and also head of the Professional Association of Ghent Stevedores and of the Association of Ghent Shipbrokers for Metal Products. Colleagues in the Association regarded him as a mediator and diplomat who understood the interests of the dockworkers. His work at

[34] Liberas, Archief Het Laatste Nieuws kantoor Gent (archief nr. 1103), 373, Kris Naudts, 'Schouders van 'n schone vrouw' (*Het nieuwsblad*, 10 November 1987).
[35] Liberas, Archief Vereniging van Gentse Havengebonden Ondernemingen (VeGHO) / Gentse Havengemeenschap (archief nr. 110), 1.1.18 yearbooks, 1948.
[36] RAG, Births Ghent, 1907, birth certificate André Marie Prosper Jean Reyniers, <agatha.arch.be> accessed 23 June 2025.
[37] Liberas, Archief Vereniging van Gentse Havengebonden Ondernemingen (VeGHO) / Gentse Havengemeenschap (archief nr. 110), 1.1.18 yearbooks, 1948.
[38] Florin and Verspeelt, *Van Association Des Intérêts Maritimes,* p.15.
[39] Florin and Verspeelt, *Van Association Des Intérêts Maritimes*, pp.62–3.

the stevedoring company Sogama also made him an important figure in the practical operation of the port.[40] In a period in which the port of Ghent sought to strengthen its international profile, André Reyniers remained a fixture on the board and was actively involved in the Association until the late 1980s.[41]

After the Association's building was demolished in the 1990s, André symbolically received the commemorative plaque from 1954, marking the Association's fiftieth anniversary and bearing the name of Maurice de Smet de Naeyer. This gesture highlighted his strong connection to the organisation's history. The plaque was subsequently installed at the premises of the family firm Reyniers & Sogama.[42] By that time the Association had relocated its headquarters to Dok Noord 2, leaving its former building at Vliegtuiglaan 1, next to the Grootdok, which was then occupied by the offices of the Port Authority of Ghent. The building was renovated in 2015 and now serves as the visitor centre of North Sea Port. It is symbolically positioned at the junction between city and port.[43]

A major recognition of André's work came in 1992, when he received the Maritime Award from the European Shipping Press Association, acknowledging half a century of commitment to the maritime industry. He died in 1997, aged 89. In the in memoriam from the International Club of Flanders, the following text appeared: 'One of the most outstanding members of our club left us. André Reyniers was a world citizen; those who had the privilege to know him, realize that something disappeared in our maritime world.'[44]

The following anecdote from 1979 conveys something of André Reyniers's character. Under his management, the company's warehouses at quay 850 on the Sifferdok were painted a striking pink and blue. André travelled to various destinations for the company and saw, in the port of Gothenburg, how company buildings were painted in bold colours and patterns. He then decided to give two Ghent art students complete freedom with his warehouses. 'I like to support young elements who have talent and are workers', he explained.[45] The sheds were demolished in 2016 because the new owners considered them too small for the cargo handled in the port of Ghent. Reyniers & Sogama was first

[40] Liberas, Archief Het Laatste Nieuws kantoor Gent (archief nr. 1103), 373, Kris Naudts, 'Schouders van 'n schone vrouw' (*Het nieuwsblad*, 10 November 1987).
[41] Florin and Verspeelt, *Van Association Des Intérêts Maritimes*, pp.92-3.
[42] Florin and Verspeelt, *Van Association Des Intérêts Maritimes*, pp.60-1.
[43] Architectura, 'Havenbedrijf Gent bouwt bezoekerscentrum'.
[44] International Club of Flanders, 'in memoriam,' *Newsletter International Club of Flanders* (1997), p.4.
[45] De Havenkrant Gent, 'Toekomst rooskleurig (maar niet meer in het roze)' (2016) 4, *De Havenkrant Gent*, p.2.

acquired by Manuports and later incorporated into the stevedoring company Euroports in the early 2000s. Euroports decided to make way for larger and newer buildings.[46]

A Family at the Docks into the Twenty-first Century

André's son, Jean Reyniers (1939), also entered port life and joined the family business, Reyniers & Sogama, as a shipping agent in the late 1980s.[47] After his father's death, he was admitted to the board of directors of the Ghent Maritime Interests Association.[48] He became vice-president of the Association in 1999.[49] In 2001, the Association changed its name once more to the Vereniging van Gentse Havengebonden Ondernemingen vzw (VeGHO), or Association of Ghent Port-Related Companies, as part of a reorganisation aimed at integrating all port organisations. Jean's son, Matthieu Reyniers (1969), still works at Euroports Terminals Ghent, indicating the family's continuing involvement in the port into the twenty-first century.[50] Their legacy lives on in the structures of the port itself and in the spirit of consultation that still characterises VeGHO today, whose operations have been integrated into Voka (Chamber of Commerce East Flanders) since 2013.

Concluding Thoughts

The history of the Reyniers family shows how the development of a port is shaped not only by infrastructure and trade flows, but also by the individuals and families who sustain its institutions. Across three generations, the Reyniers combined entrepreneurial activity in shipping and stevedoring with long-term involvement in the Association des Intérêts Maritimes de Gand. Through this dual role, they helped connect the operational life of the harbour with the organisations that represented and coordinated the interests of the port community.

Their story illustrates the importance of intermediary institutions such as the Association in medium-sized ports like Ghent. These organisations provided a platform where entrepreneurs could collectively defend their interests, negotiate with authorities and shape the evolution of the harbour. The continuity of families such as the Reyniers within these structures contributed to stability, knowledge transfer and the culture of

[46] Liberas, Archief Het Laatste Nieuws kantoor Gent (archief nr. 1103), 373, Kris Naudts, 'Schouders van 'n schone vrouw' (*Het nieuwsblad,* 10 November 1987).
[47] Liberas, Archief Rotary Club Gent (archief nr. 2134), 6, Reyniers André.
[48] Liberas, Archief Vereniging van Gentse Havengebonden Ondernemingen (VeGHO) / Gentse Havengemeenschap (archief nr. 110), 1.1.57 yearbooks, 1998.
[49] Liberas, Archief Vereniging van Gentse Havengebonden Ondernemingen (VeGHO) / Gentse Havengemeenschap (archief nr. 110), 1.1.58 yearbooks, 1999.
[50] Liberas, Archief Rotary Club Gent (archief nr. 2134), 6, Reyniers André.

consultation that characterised the Ghent port community throughout the twentieth century.

At the same time, this case highlights the value of association archives for historical research. Membership lists, reports and internal documents make it possible to trace networks of companies and families that are often absent from traditional state or corporate sources. The VeGHO archive becomes notably richer from the 1980s onwards, particularly with the establishment of the Gentse Havengemeenschap (Ghent Port Authority). The roots of this organisation can be traced back to the Werkgroep Havengebruikers (Port Users' Working Group), founded in 1981, in which Reyniers Frères played a prominent role from the beginning. This development adds depth to the archival record and opens up promising avenues for further research. It invites questions about how the port adapted to the pressures of increasingly globalised trade flows, and to what extent family-run enterprises have continued to shape its evolution up to the present day. Future work could compare similar family histories in other medium-sized ports, including the port of Dundee and the Fraternity of Masters & Seamen. Founded in the sixteenth century, this association represented shipmasters and seafarers, defending their professional and economic interests. It still exists today, albeit primarily as a charitable organisation, and its archive is partly preserved at the University of Dundee Archive Services.[51] Preserving and studying such records allows historians and archivists to reconstruct the social and economic fabric of ports, revealing the actors and relationships that underpinned their long-term development.

[51] University of Dundee Archives Services, KLoc F 068.413 1 F 844 – Fraternity of Masters and Seamen in Dundee, <https://archives.dundee.ac.uk/kloc-f-068-413-1-f-844> accessed 26 August 2026.

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